

Montana's Reading First

Questions and Answers

What is Reading First?

Under this ambitious federal initiative, the entire nation has high expectations for results. As ever, it will be left to the teachers, principals, and educators to apply the research and meet those expectations for all children. Reading First funds and support will help these professionals every step of the way.

Reading First, a new program under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as amended by No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, is a bold, new national initiative squarely aimed at helping every child in every state become a successful reader. For this purpose, up to nearly \$5 billion will be distributed among the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and outlying areas over the next several years. These funds are specifically dedicated to helping states and local school districts establish high-quality, comprehensive reading instruction for all children in kindergarten through third grade.

Reading First acknowledges that high quality reading instruction is a national goal, but a local responsibility. To achieve this goal, classroom reading instruction must reflect effective practices, and localities will need help in getting all classrooms there. Reading First grants will support programs and proposals that are based upon the evidence on how children learn to read.

What are the purposes of Reading First?

There are five purposes outlined in law:

- To provide assistance to state education agencies and local education agencies in establishing reading programs for students in kindergarten through grade 3 that are based on scientific reading research, to ensure that every student can read at grade level or above not later than the end of grade 3.
- To provide assistance to state education agencies and local education agencies in preparing teachers, including special education teachers, through professional development and other support, so the teachers can identify specific reading barriers facing their students and so the teachers have the tools to effectively help their students learn to read.
- To provide assistance to state education agencies and local education agencies in selecting or administering screening, diagnostic, and classroom-based instructional reading assessments.
- To provide assistance to state education agencies and local education agencies in selecting or developing effective instructional materials (including classroom-based materials to assist teachers in implementing the essential components of reading instruction), programs, learning systems, and strategies to implement methods that have been proven to prevent or remediate reading failure within a state.

What's different about Reading First?

Reading First, unlike previous national reading programs, is a classroom-focused nationwide effort designed to help each and every student become a successful reader. Every state will be eligible to apply, and the most needy schools and districts will receive the funds and other support they will need to succeed. Second, the size and scope of the program are much larger than previous programs. Support and expertise are required to ensure reading success for all students.

Moreover, Reading First differs from earlier initiatives by establishing clear, specific expectations for what can and should happen for all students. Reading First specifies that teachers' classroom instructional decisions must be informed by scientifically based reading research. Through Reading First funds, grants will be available for state and local programs in which students are systematically and explicitly taught five key early reading skills:

- Phonemic awareness - the ability to hear, identify, and play with individual sounds - or phonemes - in spoken words.
- Phonics - the relationship between the letters of written language and the sounds of spoken language.
- Fluency - the capacity to read text accurately and quickly.
- Vocabulary - the words students must know to communicate effectively.
- Comprehension - the ability to understand and gain meaning from what has been read.

Reading First appropriately concentrates attention on the classroom. After all, during the average school day, students spend most of their time in classrooms. Classroom instructional time should reflect the most accurate and up-to-date knowledge about the science of teaching children how to read. For that reason, Reading First provides funds to state and local districts to help classroom teachers improve the reading instruction they deliver to all of their children.

Didn't Montana already get a reading grant?

In 1999, under the Clinton administration, the Reading Excellence Act (REA) program was authorized by Congress. In a third round competition among the states, Montana was successful in getting an award of \$10,912,187. These funds became available on July 1, 2001. Eligible districts were primarily those that had been identified for improvement under Title I. Following a competitive application process, 30 elementary schools in 24 districts were funded in May 2002. The grant period ended July 30, 2004. As with Reading First, the focus is on K-3 reading instruction.

How much money will Montana receive?

Montana's allocation for the 2002-03 school year is \$2,900,000. Depending on the authorization by Congress, this amount will remain the same or increase over the next five years. Eighty percent (80%) of these funds will be available to eligible districts through a competitive application process. The law requires the state agency to "provide funds in sufficient size and scope to enable eligible LEAs to improve reading instruction" and in relation to the amount they receive under Title I, Part A. The Office of Public Instruction will utilize 20 percent of each year's funds to carry out professional development activities statewide for all teachers, including Title I teachers, of kindergarten through grade 3 and special education teachers kindergarten through grade 12. The Office of Public Instruction will also work with the institutions of higher education to enhance preservice courses for students preparing to teach kindergarten through grade 3.

What districts are eligible to receive Reading First funds?

The statute defines eligible local educational agencies as those with the "highest numbers or percentages of students in kindergarten through grade 3 reading below grade level, based on the most currently available data;" **and** has

- jurisdiction over a geographic area that includes an area designated as an empowerment zone, or an enterprise community;
- jurisdiction over a significant number or percentages of schools that are identified for Title I school improvement; or
- the highest numbers or percentages of children in poverty as counted in the Census for Title I allocations.

For Montana this will mean that districts will be eligible if at least 85 students or 25 percent or more of 4th grade students scored at less than the proficient level in reading on the 2004 ITBS. Additionally, the district must meet one of the following:

- location in an Empowerment Zone (Fort Peck Reservation only);
- is a district identified for Title I improvement; or
- have at least 80 students or 25 percent poverty based on the Census used for Title I allocations.

Eligible districts with more than one elementary school will use the following criteria to identify their schools for eligibility:

- 25 percent or more of 4th grade students scored at less than the proficient level in reading on the 2004 ITBS; **and**
- 25 percent or more of its enrollment qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch.

What will be required of school districts?

Each school funded by Reading First will be required to hire or designate a teacher to serve as the reading coach or coordinator. The reading coach will participate in trainings during the school year and provide training back at their school site. The coach will also model reading strategies, provide feedback for teachers and facilitate school study groups. All K-3 teachers in the funded schools will be required to attend

summer institutes during the grant period that will focus on reading research, instruction and assessment. Funding opportunities may be provided for teachers to take coursework to secure reading endorsements. Elementary principals will participate in trainings during the school year to assist them in providing the support and leadership necessary to improve student performance. Application of a consistent set of reading assessments will be required for grades K-3 in all funded Reading First schools.

When will Montana receive its funds?

An anticipated timeline is:

April 2003	Montana submits its state plan
August 2003	Montana receives its federal award
August 2003	Reading First Application workshop for eligible LEAs
October 2003	Competitive grant applications due to OPI (1 st cohort)
December 2003	LEAs approved for funding (1 st cohort)
July 2004	2004 Summer Institute
November 2004	Eligibility notices sent to LEA's (2nd cohort)
December 2004	Reading First Application workshop for eligible LEAs (2nd cohort) December 9-10, 2004 in Helena
February 2005	Competitive grant applications due to OPI (2nd cohort)
April 2005	LEA's approved for funding (2nd cohort)
June 2005	2005 Summer Institute June 27-30, 2005 in Great Falls

Why is it so important for children to read better, so early in school?

Countless new doors are opened when children become good readers early in life. Research shows that children who read well in the early grades are far more successful in later years, which only confirms our own intuition. Young, capable readers can take greater advantage of school opportunities, and develop invaluable confidence in their own abilities. Plus, reading success leads directly to success in other subjects such as social studies, math, and science. In the long term, students who cannot read well are much more likely to drop out of school and be limited to lower-paying jobs throughout their lifetimes. Reading is undeniably the foundation for success in society. Reading must come first, and focused, federal initiatives will provide effective and meaningful support to states and districts in their crucial efforts to make all children successful, fluent readers by the end of third grade.

Whose responsibility is it to help children become successful early readers?

Parents, clearly, are our children's first reading teachers. From birth to the time children enter school, parents can build an important foundation for reading success. But once a child enters school, teachers and principals assume the primary responsibility for teaching children to read, regardless of how well parents have done their part in this foundation building. In fact, the most important mission for elementary teachers across the nation is to ensure that every child can read in light of the varying foundations with which our children begin their formal academic careers. All children rely on their teachers to learn and grow; children with less support at home rely on their teachers the most. All teachers must therefore be supported, and teachers of the poorest readers need to be supported the most.

Children may learn about the purposes of reading from a wide range of neighborhood and community resources. Libraries, community groups, faith-based organizations, and other associations each contribute in important ways to students' literacy skills. These people can and should provide many successful and enjoyable opportunities for students to read. While this support is critical, many students will not become successful readers unless classroom reading instruction meets the highest standards. For this reason, the quality and effective delivery of reading instruction sit atop the list of all elementary school goals.

Is there only one good way to teach early reading?

No, there are a variety of successful methods to teach early reading, but they share a common understanding of and commitment to the five key skills outlined above. There are better ways - and worse ways - to perform most sophisticated, multi-faceted tasks, and teaching reading is no different. But teaching reading is too important and too complex not to equip our teachers with the best methods and best training for their crucial task.

What are the short and medium-term expectations of Reading First?

Students are expected to become better readers. Teachers are expected to deliver consistent and coherent, skills-based reading instruction. District and state leaders are expected to provide educators with ongoing, high-quality support that makes a difference in the classroom. Reading First contributes to these high expectations by steadfastly supporting high-quality local and state reading initiatives with the funds needed to make real improvements.